Microcosm 2006

Spring / Volume XXXIII

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2013

http://archive.org/details/microcosm33unse

Copiah Lincoln Community College

Microcosm

2006

Illustrator: Jessie Hunsucker

contents

Microcosm staff and advisors 4

literary hall of fame 5

short stories 7

Saturday Confessions 9

Left Hanging 17

God Made Dirt 21

Lester 28

The Stray Dog 33

Consuelo 42

poetry 49

After Mardi Gras 51

River Plop 52

At the Library 53

To My Son on the Subject of His Father's Shoes 54

Red Riding 55

Sleeping Beauty 56

Peter Peter 57

Beauty and the Beast 58

Microcosm

Staff and Advisors

staff

Josh Holmes

John Buie

Brody Coley

Ben McKenzie

advisors

Casey Hardison-Pevey

Nicole Donald

David E. Campbell

cover design

Jordan Southerland

literary hall of fame

David E. Campbell

David E. Campbell is a native of Franklin County. He is a graduate of Copiah-Lincoln Community College and the University of Southern Mississippi where he received a master's degree in mass communications. He has three sons, David, Patrick and Scott, and five grandchildren.

His career has included public information and public relations as well as work as a reporter and photographer for weekly and daily newspapers. He is currently associate director of alumni affairs and a speech instructor at Copiah-Lincoln Community College.

He has published essays and fiction in such publications as Mississippi Magazine, Bluffs and Bayous, Today in Mississippi and Tombigbee Country Magazine. One of his short stories was selected for inclusion in Stories from the *Blue Moon Café IV, an Anthology of Southern Writers*. He also writes a personal experience and commentary on Southern culture column for two weekly newspapers.

Illustrator: Cody Bradford

Short Story

Illustrator: Cari Williams

***Bev Marshall**, a native of McComb, Mississippi, is the author of three novels. Walking Through Shadows, published in 2002, was a Booksense Pick, an alternate Literary Guild selection, and was chosen as one of the best debut novels of 2002 by the New Orleans Times Picayune. Her second novel, Right As Rain, was nominated for the Mississippi Library Association Award, the National Book Critics Circle's Fiction of the Year, the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Fiction of the Year and was chosen for the Best Novels of 2004 list by the New Orleans Times Picayune.*

Both of her first two novels have been translated into German, and Walking Through Shadows has been adapted for a radio play in German.

Her third novel, Hot Fudge Sundae Blues, has been purchased for recording on CD and tape and was recently selected for large print publication. She is the recipient of the Hammond Regional Arts Award for Literature 2003, the Outstanding Faculty Advisor Award at Southeastern Louisiana University, and she serves on the Board of Directors for the New Orleans Literary Institute, which sponsors the Tennessee Williams Festival and the Saints and Sinners Literary Festival. Marshall is writer-in-residence at Southeastern Louisiana University.

Saturday Confessions

Bev Marshall

When you're eleven years old and you're waiting for something to happen, you can imagine that time has suspended and you can feel your blood flowing and winding its way through your body. I had this sensation one Saturday morning while sitting on the window seat in the front bedroom at Grandma Zinna's house. I was waiting for Bobby Stovall to fall in love with me.

Thirteen-year-old Bobby was my brother Kenneth's best friend, and he had invited him to visit us on Grandma Zinna's farm where we were staying while my mother was on an extended honeymoon with Alfred, our third (and last we hoped) step-father. Grandma wasn't at all pleased that Mama had married again, but she was happy to have our company. Widowed for over a decade, she lived alone in her white clapboard house situated on forty acres of land west of McComb, Mississippi. Behind her house her treasures lay—a sparkling man-made pond, a pasture bursting with red cover, a vegetable garden enclosed with a wire fence covered in the summer months with butter bean vines. Some forty yards from the house my Grandpa had built a

car shed where my brother and I played with the white enamel spark plugs, bags of burned out light bulbs, and yellow cardboard cigar boxes stacked against the gray-weathered walls of the shed. The cigar boxes were all that remained of our Grandpa Bert, who had died the year I was born.

I felt my grandfather's presence nearly everywhere on Grandma Zinna's farm. I had seen photographs of him: a sepia-toned one of him at age two in a long dress with a scalloped-edged hem flaring out over tightly-laced boots. He was standing with his chubby hand stretched out on a chair arm, round apple cheeks, eyes that look out at the camera with lively interest. In later photographs he stood beside a horse and buggy, tall and thin, in a suit with a bow tie, a fedora set at rakish angle over on his fine round head. The eyes were unchanged, and when I peered in the oval mirror over Grandma's dresser, I saw the same eyes laughing out at me.

Grandpa Bert, I was told, loved King Edward cigars, any kind of spirits, and beautiful women. It was difficult for me to imagine that my sixty-two-year-old grandmother had once been one of those beautiful women. Although she wore a bonnet and a ragged long-sleeved shirt to the garden, browned by the fierce Mississippi sun, her dark skin was leathery and as winkled as a crushed paper bag. She combed her thin brown hair in a side part held back over her ears with bobby pins which often slipped from her fine hair to dangle beside her cheeks. She usually wore shapeless housedresses, but on Sundays, she donned dark gabardine dresses, belted at the waist, white gloves, and low-heeled black pumps. She wore no make-up except for the fine white powder she dabbed on the shiny spots of her face and a pale pink lipstick the Avon lady had talked her into one Saturday afternoon. My grandmother was a stout woman. Stout in both body and spirit and resolution to be a good person who would be welcomed into heaven for her good deeds on earth. With this purpose in mind, she volunteered to clean Pisgah Church every Saturday morning, and since Kenneth and I were staying with her, she volunteered us, too.

My job was to stack three wine-colored hymnals on each pew with their gold-lettered bindings facing out, and on top of each stack, place a cardboard fan depicting The Last Supper. As I dusted the varnished wood of the high-backed pews with an oiled rag Grandma Zinna drew out of her canvas cleaning bag, I would sometimes find gum and cellophane candy wrappers and bits of paper left on the

benches. Once I found a note from Ida Cochran to Bud Davidson. "Bud, are you going on the hayride Friday night? Ida." His answer was written in pencil on the reverse side of the scrap of paper. "Yes, Will you sit by me?" As I held the note, imagining being fifteen and blonde and easy with boys, heat rose up inside me, and I sank into a reverie that stamped a smile on my face all day.

One of Kenneth's duties—one which I wanted, but was too short to accomplish—was to slide the white letters and numbers onto the song board for the hymns which would be sung at Sunday service. Taking turns at the piano, we practiced singing these songs after our chores were completed. Then we took turns preaching and pretending to be sinners. Pounding his fist on the lectern, Kenneth would shout, "Sinners, don't wait until it's too late to get into heaven. Repent now." I would cry, "Amen Amen." When we traded roles and it was my turn at the pulpit, I lifted my arms pointing to one side of the church and then the other. "Jesus died for you and you," I would say. "He died for you and you go right on sinning, talking mean about your neighbor, drinking the devil's whiskey, cussing, and gambling on cock fights." Then came the best part. I stretched out my arms like I was on the cross and begged the sinners to come on down. When Kenneth lurched forward and gave testimony, I laid my hands on his head and prayed for his salvation. We competed to conjure the most scandalous sins we could imagine. We confessed to breaking every commandant we could remember. We worshipped graven images, cursed our parents, lied, stole, murdered, and committed adultery routinely. Arguments would erupt when one of us would confess to outrageous crimes like cannibalism or give testimony about unfeasible sins like the Saturday when Kenneth confessed to being Dracula and sucking the blood out of Denna Stewart, turning her into a vampire, too.

When Grandma finished cleaning the Sunday school rooms, she would come into the sanctuary with a rapturous expression on her face. "All done, little ones' room, and adults', too." She would walk up the aisle, checking the song books, the numbers on the board, passing her hand over the pews, searching for dust. "Fine job, Layla Jay. Good work, Kenneth. The Lord will bless you." I asked the Lord to bless me with a horse I would name Pepper, but God must have considered songbook stacking too trivial for such a large request because I was still walking everywhere on the farm. .

Awakening from my trance-like state and tired of waiting for

Bobby to arrive, I jumped off the window seat and went into the living room where I retrieved the *True Confession* magazine I'd hidden between the couch cushions. I was in the middle of a story about Connie, a girl who had met a boy with "a wild exciting look in his eyes." The boy's name was Brad. Connie couldn't resist his "hypnotic stare" and she felt a tingling feeling around her breasts when she talked to him. I felt my own small lumps as I read this part. I could feel the tingling. "Brad," I whispered. "Oh Brad."

When I heard Grandma coming in from the garden, I stuffed the magazine back into the cushions and ran out onto the front porch. I'd never seen Grandma Zinna read anything except the Bible and farming magazines, and I knew she would be really mad if she caught me with a *True Confession*.

Although shaded by a towering magnolia tree, the front porch was an open-air oven. I lifted my hair from my neck and held it on top of my head. I had combed out my usual ponytail so that my hair flowed in "long tangled tresses" just like Connie's.

When I saw a ball of dust rolling up the drive, I tucked my camp shirt into my red shorts and cocked my hip with my hand on my waist. "Bobby's here," I yelled.

I remained posed on the porch as Kenneth ran past me to meet Bobby, who lifted a small brown suitcase out of his mother's white Ford. Exchanging rabbit punches on their arms, Kenneth and Bobby jogged up the front walk and went right past me without a glance. "Hey," I said.

Bobby looked back at me for about one half of a second. "Hey," he said.

I slumped with disappointment. He hadn't noticed the wild, tangled tresses, the soft ripe lips, the mesmerizing smoky eyes that made men crazy for me.

When we arrived at Pisgah, I hurriedly stacked the song books and flipped my dust cloth around as fast as I could. Kenneth was on the last line of the song board when I walked over to Bobby who was leaning against the pulpit. "Y'all want to play preacher?"

Kenneth's face flushed a deep red; he didn't want Bobby to know about our playacting. But before he could protest, Bobby said, "Cool. We can make fun of everybody." As he moved behind the

lectern, sticking out his chest and cocking his head slightly to his right, I supposed he was mimicking the preacher at Centenary Methodist in town where Bobby and his family belonged.

I sat on the second pew from where I had a profile view of Bobby's blonde crew cut, his sapphire eyes, his strong square chin. As Bobby pounded on the lectern, warning us we were going to hell, Kenneth warmed up to the game and began shouting amen every now and then. When Bobby walked from behind the pulpit to stand with his arms raised, I thought that his preacher must have gone to the same Save the Sinners' Souls School as ours.

In a pleading tone, Bobby said, "Sinners, come on down. Repent and be saved." I slid down the pew and stepped out into the aisle. Head down, I used my model walk, right heel in front of left toe, left heel in front of right, until I arrived to look up into Bobby's gorgeous eyes. He laid his hands on my shoulders. "Are you a sinner?" I nodded. "Do you want to be saved?" He squeezed my shoulders like he was playing an accordion. I nodded again. "Give testimony. What is your sin?"

I knew exactly what I was going to say. "Well, one day our car was broke down and I needed flour, so I walked down Enterprise Road toward Mr. Nunnery's store." I lifted my hand to my hair and ran a strand between my fingers. "A stranger, a man in a black Chevy, pulled up beside me and offered me a ride." I let out a sigh and lowered my voice. "I got in."

Bobby frowned. "That's it? That's your sin? Riding with a stranger isn't a sin."

"Oh, that's not all," I said. "I did more."

Now Bobby's mouth parted in anticipation. A fly buzzed. Grandma Zinna's mop bucket banged on the floor back in the Sunday school rooms. I took a deep breath. "He, he . . . well, he and me . . . we. We did things." Bobby's hands were sliding down my arms. "The devil was in him. He tempted me, maybe put a spell on me because I had feelings, feelings in my body that I'd never had before." Aware of Bobby's hands against my bare skin, I was having those exact feelings that very minute. "I sinned with him," I whispered.

Bobby's eyes widened. Little droplets of sweat appeared around his crew cut. "What exactly did you do with him?"

I frowned. I hadn't planned to say anything more. I lowered my eyes. "I can't."

"You've got to confess it all," Bobby said. He was breathing hard. "Go on."

My mind was tearing through the pages of every *True Confession* story I had read. Most of them had the same plot. It just varied on how the characters got to it. "I fornicated," I said. "We went all the way."

"That's a dumb sin," Kenneth said. "I'm going to the bathroom. You should have picked stealing or cheating somebody," he called as he left the sanctuary.

Bobby was still holding my arms. Clouds had formed over the sun that had earlier poured light into the church through the side windows, and I looked up into Bobby's face in the semi-darkness. I knew he was going to kiss me and I was ready.

I thought I was ready, but he leaned forward so quickly, crashing his face into mine, I lost my balance. Stumbling backwards, we fell tangled together onto the floor. Simultaneously with a clap of thunder that rattled the window panes, Bobby kissed me, running his hands through my hair just like in the stories. They were all true! "You're so pretty," he whispered, tickling my ear with his breath. He pressed his body against my stomach and I wriggled against him. I knew now how Connie and all those other girls felt. "I'm crazy about you," Bobby said, as his hand cupped the padded bra on my chest.

The next words I heard came from Grandma. "*Dear God*! Layla Jay, get up from there. Bobby Stovall, you too." Her face was as white as the altar cloth, her hands clutched her throat as though she were choking.

I scrambled up and sat on the front row pew. Bobby was studying his tennis shoes like he'd never seen them before, and Kenneth, returning from the bathroom, turned into a statue halfway up the aisle. Grandma turned to him. "Kenneth, you and Bobby go wait in the car. Layla Jay and I have to talk."

After the boys left, Grandma eased her big body down beside me. She picked up the dust pan she'd dropped and placed it on her lap. My heartbeats kept time with the rain pelting furiously down on the roof. Grandma laid both hands flat on the dirty pan. "Layla Jay, I

want you to tell me what you kids were up to."

I explained about playing church and that Bobby was the preacher, me the sinner. When I came to the part where I gave testimony, my voice faltered. "I said I fornicated."

Grandma laid her hand on mine. "Where did you learn about such things?"

"In *True Confession* magazines," I whispered.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Where did you get trash like that to read?"

"From Mama. She hides them in her night stand, and I borrow them and put them back when I finish."

Grandma nodded like she already knew what I was going to say. "Like father, like daughter, like granddaughter."

"I'm like Grandpa Bert?" This news wasn't entirely unwelcome.

She was staring at the pulpit. "Yes, he hid things too. He was a sinner. Your mama took after him; I was hoping you were going to take after my side of the family."

"What'd Grandpa do to be a sinner?" I remembered his smile in the photographs, the cocked fedora.

"Never mind that. Finish your story. What happened after you gave testimony?"

I told her everything, how I knew Bobby was going to kiss me, how we fell and kissed again.

Grandma tuned her knees sideways toward me and took both of my hands in hers. "You wanted him to do that? You liked it?"

I wanted to give her the right answer, wanted to tell her what she hoped to hear, but I saw the look in her eyes that was the same look my mother got when I handed over my report cards. There was no use lying. "Yes," I whispered. "I liked it a lot."

Grandma Zinna's face went slack, her head fell forward. She looked so old, older than I felt I'd ever be. Dropping my hands, she said, "I reckon you can't help it. It's in your blood. You can't help your blood."

I thought back to the tube of blood a nurse had taken from the

vein in my arm. I had watched as it filled, not with the shade of my mother's poppy lipstick I had expected, but with a red so dark it was nearly black.

The rain had stopped and there was an awful stillness in the air between us. Grandma stood and looked up at the cross behind the pulpit. "I asked for the Lord's help. First it was Bert who couldn't help himself from tasting the fruits of other women, then your mama going through men like Grant through Richmond. She was as wild as that wall-eyed mare you tried to ride once. Now it's you. Not even developed into a woman and already the sins of the flesh have afflicted you." She looked back at me. "My prayers aren't heard. The Lord is just not listening."

"Maybe our sins aren't big enough for Him to fool with, Grandma."

"Oh we all got big enough sins. We all do." She didn't smile, but her face softened. "Let's go home. We've got beans to snap before dinner."

Following Grandma Zinna down the aisle, I noticed how her back curved forward as she walked. Grandpa Bert's steps would be light and quick, his body tall and erect. I couldn't see him walking beside this stooped, slow-walking woman. Sadness washed over me like a deluge of baptismal water, and I wanted to run to her, throw my arms around her, and ask her to forgive us for all the pain we three had caused.

But as I watched Grandma pick up the dust cloth she had dropped, I felt the rush of my dark blood pushing its way through my body, running straight down my legs from the center of my heart. I looked back at the pulpit and remembered Bobby's eyes, his outstretched arms beckoning me to him.

I tucked my blouse into my shorts, strutted past Grandma, and went out the door of Pisgah Church. I marched on across the damp grass toward the Dodge where through the rain-streaked window I could see Bobby's blond head turning to me.

Barry Dunlap *earned a Master's degree in English from Southeastern Louisiana University, where he studied under Tim Gautreaux. His work has been published in* Spillway Review, The Dead Mule, Southern Hum, Southern Scribe, Christianity and Literature, Pebble Lake Review, *and* Powhatan Review *(forthcoming). He currently lives in Hammond, Louisiana with his wife and four children.*

Left Hanging

Barry L. Dunlap

The afternoon sky hung over the small five-room house on Highway 42 like a stringer of dead fish. It was Sunday, and Tanner Griggs squeezed a sweaty can of soda between his legs under the sections of paper that spread across his lap. The sports page glided close to him as the porch swing creaked a lazy tune. On the corner of the clapboard house, a window unit struggled against the Louisiana heat, dripping like shingles on fire.

"Hey, Evelyn," said Tanner. "Says here that Buck Jones caught a fourteen-pounder in the tourney. Finished third."

"Oh," said his wife. "Is he and Laura still together?"

"Huh? Oh, I don't know. Says that the winner was from Ohio. Now why in the world would some fellar from Ohio come down here for a fishing tournament?"

"I heard they split up," said the woman snapping beans into a white dishpan.

"Split up Ohio? What are you talking about?"

"No. The Joneses."

As Tanner pulled the paper back from his face to give his wife a puzzled look, he heard the crackle of rocks in the driveway. The couple had spent almost every Sunday afternoon the same way for the past forty-three years. It was more than rare for someone to pay them a visit. On occasion, a funeral might interrupt their day of rest, but that was seldom. There were, of course, the times a visiting preacher was in town for a revival. Tanner would always bring up the fact that Jesus was a fisherman, or so he thought. He'd heard some stories about a

big catch. Every time the docile visitor—whether he was from Morganza, Shreveport, or Baton Rouge—every time, he would chase that bait and Tanner would land fifteen minutes of stories about Channel Cats in the Tickfaw River or ancient choupique in the slough behind the barn. By the time Evelyn would ask if they wanted a second cup of coffee, the preacher would realize that his seeds would not find fertile soil here. Tanner never understood why they always left so soon when everyone seemed to be having such a good time.

"Look at that," said Tanner as the shiny black SUV pulled into the drive. "Looks like a Cadillac sign, but that's one of them city trucks."

"Bet they selling something," the woman said, lugging her dishpan into the house.

Tanner removed a red bandana from his trouser pocket and wiped it across his forehead, set his cola can on the porch below him, and stared at his modest house reflected in the polished vehicle. Beyond the glare of the glass, he could see a woman with long, dark hair motioning to the driver. She was smiling and pointing at the front of the house, but somehow oblivious to Tanner's dumbfounded look. The truck engine lurched into park and the driver's door opened. Tanner continued to stare.

"Excuse me," said the man. He appeared to be in his late thirties. "Do you live here?"

Tanner took a long look at him before answering. "Yep."

"We were just driving through the area—on our way back to Slidell. Well, I know this sounds crazy, but my wife loves your screen door."

Tanner glanced over at the truck. The woman smiled and gave a little wave. He glanced back at the younger man. The silence seemed to disturb him as he slid his hands into the pockets of his shorts.

"Would you be willing to sell it?"

"Huh? The door?" asked Tanner.

"Yes sir. I've got a cordless screw-gun in the truck. I would take it down and everything. My wife is into antiques. She saw your door and made me turn around."

Tanner wiped the sweat from his nose and turned to Evelyn who

was coming through the door.

"Hello Ma'am," said the pleasant intruder.

"What's going on Tanner?" she asked, pretending not to know.

"This fellar wants to buy our door."

"Gosh, I don't know," said the woman. "We've had that door a long time. Do you remember where we got it? I think it was Kuhn's Feed and Seed in Ponchatoula. How long's that been?"

"What does it matter?" said the old man. "He don't want the history. He wants the door."

Tanner was far from a genius, but he had worked in the cattle butchering business long enough to know that you never act like you want to sell at first. The old man had all but forgotten that he passed though a screen door ten times a day. The door wasn't important to him. But making a city person work for something was second only to dragging a plastic worm beside a log, and Tanner planned to enjoy this.

"I'll give you one hundred dollars for it," said the young man.

Tanner's jaw flinched.

The offer made Evelyn nervous. She quickly returned to the kitchen, grabbing another handful of beans. As she snapped them in two, her eyes toured the room with thoughts of what a hundred dollars would buy. She could picture a new mixer next to the sink, or an automatic coffee maker. I *could replace this old floor with something shiny*, she thought. Suddenly the pan slid out of her lap and dumped onto the floor. She scurried to pick up the escaped beans and returned to the living room, just inside the screen door.

"Can't do it, son," said the old man. "It's been in the family too long." Tanner sent a half-smile toward his wife. "Well, sir, I've got cash," said the young man, reaching for his wallet. "Does that make a difference?"

"Naw," said Tanner. "It ain't the money."

"Alright," he said. "One twenty-five is as high as I can go. Take it or leave it."

The door of the black SUV slammed, and the truck was soon speeding down Highway 42. Evelyn stepped out onto the porch, and

Tanner picked up the business section. He pretended to read an article about the gross national product while wrestling his thoughts. *What the hell was I thinking? I could have bought a new reel and a bunch of lures.*

The woman walked over and picked up the can that lay just below her husband.

"Says here that China is going to own us all if we keep buying from Wal-Mart," said Tanner.

"Is that what it says?"

.

Illustrator: Cody Bradford

Greg Johnson *is a current Master of Arts student at Southeastern Louisiana University. Recent publications include short fiction published within* Beginnings *and* BIGnews Magazine.

God Made Dirt

Greg Johnson

By our best calculations Millie went crazy sometime back in the spring. She dropped her bombshell in early July; but she had lost it way before then. In fact, she had probably always been a little *not right*—as we like to call it in our small towns. The advantage of being crazy in any state that has ever flown the Confederate flag is that you can fall under the label of eccentric. And that's where Millie Bucannen lived, under the umbrella of eccentricity.

That umbrella sat apparent and large, teased and sprayed right on top of her head. Her hair, which she had done every week, was red. It was as red as any fire engine or as any drop of blood that ever flowed through a man's veins. She called it "valentine auburn." That was maybe Millie's only talent—she had a way with words. She hardly ever used any, and when she did, she made them count.

Millie Posey was known throughout the town, not for the accomplishments she claimed—which was primarily being of good stock and barrel, but for the way she pulled things off. Like having the audacity to wear her hair in such a ridiculous way. Or the fact that she never filled out her own withdrawal-slips at Community Bank, nor did she ever push her own buggy down at The Food Mart. She never even explained why. She simply asked the cashier or the stock clerk if they could "do it for her." And they did. We always did. Maybe we were the ones who were crazy.

I think the day that Millie truly lost it was down at Adelle's, getting her red umbrella fixed. It was sometime in April. I remember because there were lots of things blooming all over town. Things were poppin' up in our gardens and flowerbeds. And really, I guess in some of our own personal beds, too. Or at least in Millie's. That's what Lou-Anne told her right from underneath the dryer.

"So Millie, hun, how do you feel about Hazel spending so much time down at your husband's lot?"

Millie lifted her head up real quick like in that chair and stared Lou-Anne down through the mirror. Adelle stopped teasing Millie's hair and added her opinion.

"Well, I know I wouldn't appreciate someone stopping over to see George at the garage all the time. I mean, Rhonda said that 'ol biddy is over there sometimes two or three afternoons a week! C'mon, it don't take nobody that many trips to buy no damn car."

I thought Millie's green eyes turned the same shade as her valentine locks. She stood up from that chair and it's hard to say if she stomped or staggered toward the door. She never did have the best posture, but her shoulders did seem to be a little more slumped than usual. And that's when it happened. She looked back and gave one final comment about the whole situation before she left.

"I never—NEVER could stand some dirty, rotten, old, whore." Millie's voice had never sounded so different. It was kind of shaky. I remember she kept her teeth real tight. "Jesus may have been willing to walk around with a low-life harlot, but I ain't gonna stand for it. Even God knows I'm better than that."

She was a woman of few words. After that, the girls were, too. The salon sounded like an empty tin can. No one knew whether they should laugh or be offended. I felt real bad for Millie and didn't quite know what to say myself. But I guess Adelle said it best. "She had to find out somehow."

As the next few months went by all the stories proved to be true. Hazel was indeed making special lunch trips over to Pawn Posey's car lot. Everyone knew or had known about it. I think that everyone let it happen, or had their own willingness to overlook it because they knew that the bigger it got, the bigger it would end. I think it's just *not right* the way people would rather see a big show than see things just turn out.

It was late May, the time of the year when all the holidays are nearly over and new social occasions have to be invented. And this was the purpose of the Ladies' Auxiliary meeting down at the VFW. We weren't actually inventing a new holiday, we were planning our Annual July Fourth Heritage Festival, the theme—"God Made Dirt, and it don't

hurt!" This year we had chosen to honor our community's fine tradition of farming. So these meetings sort of became big social events themselves. Especially since there wasn't much else to look forward to this time of the year. This meeting also had a whole other, less official, agenda.

When everyone talked about the meeting, they sort of just breezed through the conversation. "Who you gonna vote for? What refreshments you gonna make? What you wearing?" And then the final question, "You think Millie *and* Hazel will *both* be there?" This is where most of the talk stayed.

Everyone came real early to the meeting that day. They wanted a good spot. Or to at least be there when the women walked in. I chose not to have that fortune. I arrived after their arrivals. When I got there, they were already seated on opposite sides of the room. All the ladies said their eyes never met. I did take a quick glance at Millie. The green was back in the middle of her eyes but the red wasn't completely gone. It had moved into little lines all around the white part. And the outsides, they were puffy.

Lou-Anne had already called the meeting to order and was reading the minutes from the meeting before. "Last time we decided three major things. First, we are proud to remind everyone that the theme of this year's Annual July Fourth Heritage Festival will be, 'God made dirt, and it don't hurt!'" All the ladies responded with smiles and claps.

"Secondly, we are honored to announce that Mrs. Millie Bucannen Posey has so graciously donated her great-grandfather, General Bucannen's war token. That's right! The very weapon he used to defend our country and bring independence to our homes, his cannon! For years, it has been the centerpiece down at her husband, Mr. Pawn Posey's car lot. Now the cannon will be added as a historical site to our beautiful town square. Ladies, please give Millie a round of applause to show our gratitude!"

All the ladies clapped graciously but stared right at Hazel.

"And finally, the decision we made was that, in keeping with our theme, Mrs. Hazel Rester Small will arrange the decorative flower bed that will surround our new landmark. Let's all give thanks to Hazel."

All the ladies clapped for Hazel but stared right at Millie.

Lou-Anne tried to ignore the tennis match everyone was watching and move the meeting along. Or maybe it was more like she meant to kick the contest up a notch. "Ladies, the next important decision we must make is to choose a Mistress of Ceremonies and I would like to nominate..."

I just knew she was gonna say Hazel.

"Mrs. Millie Bucannen Posey."

Thank god, she didn't.

"In honor of the enormous contribution of her personal family heirloom. Do we have any other nominations?"

For the second time in just as many months Millie brought an entire room full of women to a dead silence. "In respects to her contribution, I would like to nominate Hazel Small," Millie said.

It was obvious that even Lou-Anne was thrown for a few seconds, which seems like forever in a situation like this. But, she recovered. And she seemed real excited when she made her next announcement.

"Okay, ladies, we have two nominees on the floor. How shall we choose?"

"Flip a coin!" I stood up and shouted. Lord help me! I never speak out at meetings like these but I just couldn't bear to see it all come down to a show of hands. What if Millie lost? I just couldn't watch her suffer another indignity.

"A coin toss?" Lou-Anne asked. "Does anyone object?"

When no one did, Lou-Anne invited both women up to the podium and had someone fetch a coin from her pocketbook. It was quiet as golf.

"Hazel do you pick Heads *or* Tails?" Lou-Anne asked.

"I'll have Heads." Hazel answered.

"Is that all right with you, Millie?" Marcia turned and asked.

Millie nodded. Then Marcia flipped the coin in the air.

All the members of the Auxiliary were sucked in. Those grown women looked like children watching cartoons. Mouths slightly opened, eyes poppin' out of their heads. They leaned forward slightly, like the way their husbands watched a basketball game.

Lou-Anne caught the coin, flipped it onto her hand and said, "Tails."

Millie met eyes with Hazel for the first time and told her, "Now all you have to worry about is making your beds." She turned to walk away, but stopped and added, "just remember, you picked heads."

For the rest of the Spring and early Summer, the women down at the little league ball park seemed much more interested in the sport of gossip than their kids' games. Even the crack of a home run couldn't distract the women away from their conversation. Getting the latest scoop was as exciting as any man catching a ten-pound bass.

Earline Merritt was working lane seven, stealing people's change down at the food mart. If someone was due four dollars change, she'd just give 'em three. If the customer noticed, it was a mistake and she'd give it back. If not, one extra for her. We found out because Janice works lane eight next to her.

Now, Janice, her husband is the coach for the purple, pirate team, at least for the rest of this season. So, next year, there will be a soar surprise for him when he's not asked back. *Too mean to the kids on the field* is what the league official says. The official is Earline's husband.

They even say it at church. At the last potluck, Janice tells everybody not to eat Earline's pot roast because she feeds her dogs off the same plate she feeds her husband. But, by the next one, Earline had told everyone not to touch Janice's green-salad because she makes her kids pee in the garden for fertilizer. Anything will be said to make it a tied match.

We all figured it would be real hard for Millie to make a comeback in this final quarter. Work and church gossip are easy enough to overcome. But, adultery was a whole different game. You can't fight fire with fire, so to speak.

I didn't see Millie again until July. In fact, no one saw much of her *or* her husband. But, everyone saw Hazel flitting around town getting her hair done and buying a new outfit. All she could talk about was how excited she was for the Heritage Festival, that her flowers would be the prettiest things anyone had ever seen, keeping in the tradition of our fine community. They would do so much more for everyone than some old rusty cannon.

During that time Hazel made her beds. The cannon was moved to a nice little pedestal in the town-square. And a big banner with our theme "GOD MADE DIRT, AND IT DON'T HURT!" was hung over it. The day of the event, Independence Day, the high school band was set up on bleachers and was playing patriotic songs. All the songs we play at football games. The town's families were set up on lawn chairs and picnic blankets out on the grass in front of the cannon. Waiting for the main event.

Lou-Anne took to the podium next to the cannon and welcomed everyone. She said how proud we were of our community, how we always fought to be the best and have the best festival every year. And that's when I really realized for the first time that this festival wasn't nothing about farming or gardening. It seemed to me that it was really more about the heritage of getting your hands dirty. After Lou-Anne delivered her pep-rally, she asked everyone to welcome Millie to the podium.

I hadn't noticed that Millie was even there until she took the stage. And when I first saw her, she was so different. She had a nice gray dress on and good shoes but she didn't look the same. The band played a big, loud rendition of "This Land is Our Land." Millie was holding a big sparkler that was dancing all about with pretty little bursts. She was so different. She was *not right*. Her flaming red hair had kind of dulled, like a muddy red. It was really darker than dulled—closer to black. In fact the more I remember it, it was black. Black as sin. Blacker than sin, almost as dark as death. She went and stood by the cannon.

The band was finished playing its song and Millie held the sparkler up high. When it got closer to her face I saw another change. Her green eyes almost seemed sorta blue. And they were staring right at Hazel Rester Small standing in the front row.

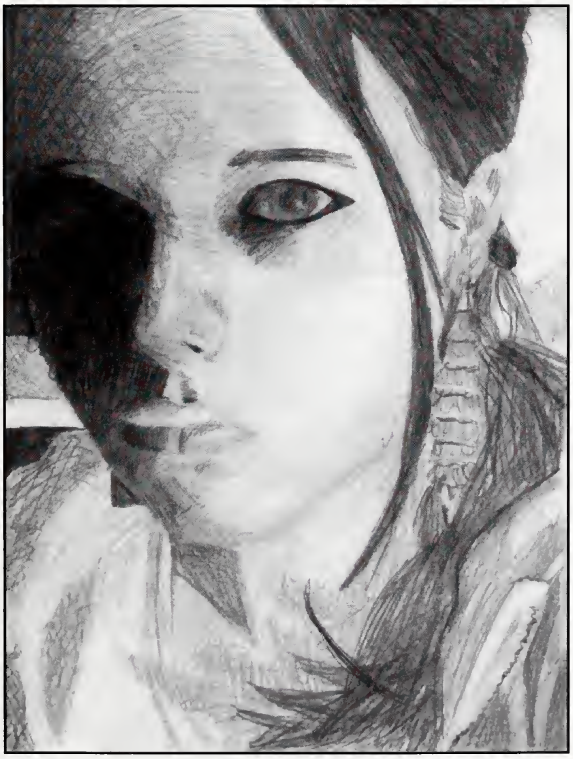
"Hazel, I'm very sorry my husband couldn't be here for you today. He was capacitated." Millie said as she slowly lowered the sparkler down to the tiny fuse on the cannon.

For years the debate around town has been whether Millie actually told Hazel that Pawn was "*in*capacitated" or "*de*capitated." But, no one's really had the nerve to go down to the county penitentiary for the criminally insane, just to ask such a question. Because what happened after that little fuse burnt down into The Bucannen

Cannon made Millie Bucannen Posey one of the most revered and certifiably eccentric women to populate our town.

When that cannon went off, something shot clear out of it and knocked Hazel straight out to the ground dead. The explosion blew the podium over and even ripped down our banner. Millie made her way off the platform and stood by Hazel. And there she was, shot down by Pawn Posey's chopped-off head, lying flat dead in the flowerbeds she had made. Right above Hazel's head was our pretty little banner that read, "GOD MADE DIRT, AND IT DON'T HURT!"

After a few moments, Millie leaned over to Hazel and told her, "God also made Hell, and it does."



Illustrator: Cari Williams

Kelly Stelzriede *was born in New Mexico and raised in Basalt, Colorado where she owned and operated her own information systems consulting business for 10 years prior to her move to Mississippi. She is currently enrolled in the Local Area Network Technology Program at Copiah-Lincoln Community College. She is rapidly and efficiently (much to her relief) updating skills necessary to continue competing in today's technology-based business world. She is planning on continuing her education and exploring the possibility of becoming a teacher.*

Lester

Kelly Stelzriede

I will begin this story the exact same way almost every cat story I have ever read begins:

I am not much of a "cat person." Never have been. Never understood the attraction.

My father used to say, "Dogs are real pets. They come when you call. Cats take a message and get back to you." I've owned dogs and horses, but cats? No. Not for me.

So I am not sure how I managed to find myself under the tutelage of Lester Stelzriede. (Also Known as Mrs. Lester, The Lestress and Fat Butt.) Over the years I have known her, I have come to believe that our life together is all a part of a plan she formulated the first time Lester ever saw me, which, frankly, was months before she ever allowed me to see her.

I believe the life she currently leads, one of idle privilege, was in her plan all along, and I believe that this premeditated plan has fallen together quite nicely for her. I also believe her ownership of me came about a little differently than she intended, but since the result is the same (that she has a snuggly warm body at her disposal when the mood strikes and three square meals a day that don't involve a dumpster dive) she doesn't really sweat the particulars.

Lester first came to me as a set of paw prints in the snow early in the winter of 2002. Without fail, after a snowfall the night before, I began seeing a set of paw prints on my side stairs. They headed up the stairs, stopped at my deck door where they were joined by what I

assumed was a bony butt print, and then headed back down the stars into the anonymity of fresh tire marks in the driveway.

After several snowfalls I started worrying about this poor stray animal who obviously, and very mistakenly, thought there might be food on the other side of my door. Or maybe she just liked sitting there looking at herself in the reflection of the glass. I don't know for sure, and with this cat, there really was no telling. But I began leaving tuna at the door when I came in at night. Every night a fresh can of tuna. This went on for weeks. And then I got a little lazy and switched to kitty kibble procured from our neighbor's barn-cat stash. Lester didn't care too much for the kibble and left it for the neighbors dog to eat. The bony butt print reappeared and that, you see, is when the training began. In retrospect, I see this clearly. But back then I assumed some sort of kibble allergy had befallen my starving ghostly feline friend, so I started buying little cans of cat food for her. In bulk. Just in case I got lazy again.

And so the months passed. Each night I would place a can of cat food outside my door and in the morning I would pick up the empty carcass and toss it into the dumpster on my way to work. That was the extent of our relationship. And then one day I saw her.

I knew it was Lester immediately, although we had not yet been formally introduced. There she sat on the hood of my truck, eyes wide open. That expression, one that I have since grown accustomed to, if not immune to, screamed "OMIGOD WHAT EVIL LURKS? I AM CERTAIN YOU WILL CHOP ME INTO LITTLE PIECES SHOULD I REMAIN BUT I AM PARALIZED WITH FEAR AND AM THEREFORE UNABLE TO ESCAPE YOUR CERTAIN FURY!" It also, very clearly, said "Bring it, Sister."

She was a sight, for sure. I could count every bone in her body from forty feet and I really wasn't entirely sure of her coloring. The thought crossed my mind that, after months of feeding she was still this gaunt, what shape had she been in that last winter? I blinked, heard a squeak, looked back and all that was left were paw prints on my windshield.

I saw her often after that, and finally got to the point where if I called her, can of food in hand, she would appear at the bottom of the stairs and wait for me to put it down and move far away before she came up to the deck partake of the tender salmon and liver slices in

gravy. One afternoon I noticed some interesting cuts on her face (through the closed blinds of the deck sliding glass door) and decided it was time to take her bony behind to the vet. The problem with this decision, of course, was that I could not get near her and I would need to get near her if I planned on getting her in a crate and hauled over to Beverly at the town's vet clinic.

My only choice was a cat trap, and this would likely terrorize her into forever hating me and since my identity had somehow started wrapping itself around the role of The Savior of Lester, this was a very difficult choice. The cuts were not healing, I worried that she was not spayed, her coat was a dingy gray and I figured she might eventually forgive me. So I set the trap. In the eleven days that trap was set I took four cats to the shelter, three to the vet and returned nine to their rightful owners. It never occurred to me to stop feeding her OUTSIDE the trap. Apparently Lester had no taste for fresh salmon. Which is what I baited the trap with. At no small expense.

Several days after the cat trap was safely returned to it's owner and life on Midland Avenue had been freed of the caterwauling of captured animals, I happened to leave my sliding door open one afternoon and wouldn't you just know that Lester chose that particular day to sneak inside. The details of her capture involved much angst and quarrel, and the details are now but fading scars, so I will spare you the details. Sufficed to say she was inoculated, spayed and treated for worms and then released back into the wilds of downtown Basalt, Colorado. Where she went underground for weeks.

Oh, I called and enticed and bribed, but she was having none of that. No ma'am. I did see her twice during that time, but she no longer trusted me, the woman who had fed her and nourished her for so many months: I was being punished. About every third can of left out tuna (I tossed the cheap Wal-Mart wet food I had been feeding her. Desperate times called Chicken of The Sea.) was left untouched. Lester let me know that she was not pleased to have been stripped so unceremoniously of her dignity and womanhood all in one fell swoop, but eventually she forgave me. And I went back to the Wal-Mart brand succulent chicken and liver slices.

After that, without those hormones coursing through her veins, she started coming up the stairs before I went inside after leaving her food in front of the door; and once I was able to quickly touch her. She did, however, disappear for two days after the touching incident

in retribution for my violation of personal space, but she was no longer skin and bones and she was staring to show a distinct gray and white coloring.

When winter came again she had put on some weight and her fur was looking nice and thick. Unfortunately the weather turned from bad to worse very early in the season and pet warnings were commonplace. Right before my Christmas trip to Mississippi, I decided that I would have to trap Lester inside, pray that she would figure out the cat box thing, leave her with a week's worth of food and water and pay the neighbor boy to check on her every day. I understood that after that she may well disappear for good, but I couldn't live with myself if she froze to death because she had not food to warm her from the inside out during the coldest week of the year.

I worried and stressed the entire time I was away. The neighbor boy started screening my 30 daily calls and the drive home from the airport nearly did my last nerve in for good. I arrived back at 175 Midland sometime after midnight on the 2nd of January and threw open the front door calling for Mrs. Lester, announcing my return and proclaiming her freedom. Ten minutes of frantic searching through my 600 square foot apartment uncovered nothing but a full litter pan (thank God) and a half eaten rodent (ew).

I had all but given up finding her alive, when suddenly she appeared, sauntering, stretching, from the closet. She saw me and immediately sat down and started that bathing thing that cats do. Did she want to go outside? Heavens no. No, she was perfectly happy in the closet. I am almost certain that if she could speak she would have told me to hold her calls for the rest of the week. Leave food at the closet door. If I needed her, she'd be in there. Where it wasn't below zero. Where there were no predators. Where food just appeared from nowhere and was plentiful.

I woke up about four in the morning a few nights later to a weight of about nine pounds pushing my legs into the mattress. The next night, she was under the covers. By the end of the week, she had her own drawer and had started leaving toiletries in the bathroom.

By day seven of our new living arrangement she had her own key and a parking space.

Occasionally she went out, but her home was the closet during the day and the bed at night. When I met Lester she weighed about 4

pounds soaking wet. It took me two years to earn enough of her trust that she would let me pet her. Today she sleeps on my pillow most nights and finds herself presentable in a plus size.

Lester isn't dead. This isn't that sort of cat story. No, in fact, Lester moved to Mississippi with me last summer. She spent the hurricane in a crate in my boyfriend's parent's guest bathroom. A day or two later she spent an entire day trapped underneath my bathtub and then she weathered four days in September without electricity and air conditioning.

Today Lester tops the scale at about 19 pounds. I worry about her weight, but my thinking is that she spent the first half of her life fighting for everything she got: she has earned her fat behind. If the vet is ok with it, I am ok with it.

I'm not a cat person, but Lester isn't a people cat. We have worked through our mutual prejudice. We have given peace a chance.

Illustrator: Jessie Hunsucker

David E. Campbell is a native of Franklin County. He is a graduate of Copiah-Lincoln Community College and the University of Southern Mississippi where he received a master's degree in mass communications. He has three sons, David, Patrick and Scott, and five grandchildren.

His career has included public information and public relations as well as work as a reporter and photographer for weekly and daily newspapers. He is currently associate director of alumni affairs and a speech instructor at Copiah-Lincoln Community College.

He has published essays and fiction in such publications as Mississippi Magazine, Bluffs and Bayous, Today in Mississippi and Tombigbee Country Magazine. One of his short stories was selected for inclusion in Stories from the Blue Moon Café IV, an Anthology of Southern Writers. He also writes a personal experience and commentary on Southern culture column for two weekly newspapers.

The Stray Dog

David E. Campbell

Earnest stared out the window with an intensity that could have burned a hole in the object of his gaze had it been within range. The one-paneled curtain hanging from a metal rod over the window was half open, but his sight wasn't obscured. Years of filtering a blazing setting sun from family suppers had left the panel as thin as a spider web. He felt for his coffee cup along the red oil cloth covering the round kitchen table as if afraid he would lose the object of his distain if he glanced away.

"Earnest," Floe said in a volume barely above a whisper. "Earnest Cuttingham, you ain't heard a thing I said," she barked in a harsh loud voice. "What you studying so hard at?"

"Dog. Dern stray dog. Somebody done throwed out one." Earnest lifted an emerald green coffee mug to his lips, sipped and pulled the mug back from his mouth. "Looka yonder." He set the mug down then pointed out the window with a scaly index finger down the long graveled lane leading to the house from County Road 193. The lane parted a pasture more owned by erosion that grass. Waist high broom sage separated the road from a barbed wire fence.

A yellow longhaired dog trotted along the left side of the lane, panting, headed toward the house. It had one white foot, ears the

color of rotting bananas and a dark, thick line down the center of its head leading to a muzzle the color of smut. The dog stopped, turned and looked behind as if expecting someone to be following. Before resuming its travel the animal dropped its front shoulders and stretched its neck as if trying to detect a friendly odor coming from the Cuttingham home. The dog was thin, hardly thick enough to make a shadow and walked with its rear end cocked to the side like a truck with a bent frame coming down the highway.

"That dog ain't nothing. It's Lori we got to do something about," Floe said. Lori was their four-year-old grandchild left with them by their divorced daughter, Stephanie, so she could go "find herself." The daughter died in a fire 200 miles away three weeks later in what Earnest called a "juke joint." Lori stopped speaking after her mother and father divorced almost a year before being left with her grandparents. She cried, but never spoke when she learned her mother was dead. Lori's mother had been dead almost six months, but still the child never uttered a sound other than attention getting grunts.

Earnest turned away from the dog and stared into Floe's eyes, "Look, you took her into town to the doctor and he said ain't no reason she can't talk," Earnest said. "Ain't nothing we can do. That settles it. That's all she wrote." Earnest turned his head to look out the window again and continued. "Our daughter, notice I said our daughter this time, not your daughter, dumped her on our front porch with a grocery sack of clothes and drove off with some drunk, her blonde hair blowing in the wind." Floe stared at a hole the size of a dime in the table cloth. Earnest rubbed his nose with his right wrist. "That same daughter run Carl off and accused him of child abuse so he'd go far enough to never be found." Earnest turned to face Floe. "That boy ain't done nothing but love his daughter. I know that. You know that. The sheriff knows it."

Floe bit her lower lip. She wiped twice along her left cheek with her thumb to dry a tear that had escaped and crept run down her face. "But she was our daughter, and I love her, and Lori is all we have left of her," Floe said pausing to suck in a breath of air between each phrase.

Earnest could not stand to hear a woman cry. He slid his ladder back chair away from the table and pulled Floe's face into the pocket of his shoulder, wrapping his arm around her head, almost in a smother lock. "I can't talk about it," he said in a raised voice. She'll

talk when she's ready, and not before. She misses her daddy. Don't you remember what they were like together?" Earnest asked, but did not want an answer.

The floor near the doorway to the kitchen creaked, causing both Earnest and Floe to release their embrace. A child with dark tangled hair hanging to her shoulder blades, barefooted, wearing an oversized yellow tee shirt that hung to her knees stood in the doorway staring at the couple.

Floe sniffed, rose from the chair and bent at the waist to be eye level with Lori. "Morning darling. Want a biscuit and some molasses?" Earnest got up and walked by Lori, stroking her on the head. He kicked the screen door in the next room on the bottom corner to force it open so he could walk onto the front porch. The child looked at Floe and turned her head toward the table. Floe reached for a green plate that matched the mug Earnest drank coffee from. She retrieved a biscuit with the plate from the stove sitting not more than ten feet away. Lori watched a ribbon of syrup pore across a fork onto the plate from a bright half-gallon can without a label. The syrup crawled toward the biscuit as Lori stared. Once it touched the biscuit, she looked toward the refrigerator and grunted twice. Floe opened the refrigerator and gripped a container of milk. She stood with her hand on the milk and waited before shaking her head and continuing. Floe reached for a glass with girls riding ponies painted around the center. It was a new glass, just emptied of strawberry jelly.

Lori sopped her biscuit in the syrup and took a bite. She then lay the biscuit aside and turned to stare out the window with almost as much intensity as Earnest had earlier. Floe came to the table to see what she was watching. Earnest was walking down the center of the lane leading from the house waving his arms over his head. Floe could see his mouth moving but he was out of range for her to hear what he was saying. Farther down the lane, the dog pulled its tail between its legs, ran almost to the woods on the opposite side of the pasture and stopped to look back at Earnest. With hands on his hips and elbows spread, Earnest stared at the dog before turning to walk back to the house.

When Earnest turned up the driveway to his home that afternoon he could see Lori, holding a doll, sitting on the porch in one of the two rocking chairs that sat beside the front door to the house. The scene reminded Earnest of Lori's mother sitting in the same chair

holding the same doll. The paper sack of clothes that came with Lori held no toys. Floe dug out stored keepsakes from another little girl's childhood for Lori. Earnest drove his dark green Ford pickup until the bumper almost touched the steps to the porch. He got out and kicked the side of his boot against the steps to knock off clumps of mud. He had spent the day pouring concrete piers for a house. Mud caked on the sole and side of his shoes as he worked around the cement mixer.

He smiled at Lori. Her expression was that of an experienced poker player. Before he walked up the steps his attention was drawn to movement to his left. The stray dog was peeping around the edge of a pier helping supporting the porch. He faced the dog and stomped both feet. "Git outta here." That startled Lori, and she twitched and pulled her feet into the chair and sat on them. Earnest turned and ran up the steps to Lori. He bent and kissed her with the touch of a butterfly on her forehead. "Papaw didn't mean to scare you," he whispered. He kneeled in front of her and asked a series of questions like he had many times before, and like every time before, she was silent. Lori turned her head away from Earnest when he spoke and looked at the doll, stroking its blonde hair.

Inside, Earnest stuck his head into the kitchen and said to Floe, "That dern dog's still out there."

"There's a pan of food scraps over there." Floe pointed to a small table sitting between the sink and the refrigerator. "You can feed it, if you want."

"I ain't feeding that thing. It ain't staying here."

"Why not? Lori might enjoy a dog."

"That ain't no dog. It's just a pest. It'll suck eggs, kill our chickens, and come up with a bunch of puppies. That thing won't even run a rabbit or tree a squirrel," Earnest said before walking away to plop down in front of a black and white TV that was broadcasting the evening news. Remembering a newspaper he bought on the way home, Earnest got up and went back to his truck. He felt two bumps on the back of his leg as he walked from the steps to the truck door. Turning, he saw the stray dog run under the porch, look out at him and wag its tail. "I'm gonna wind up having to kill you," he said as he turned to face the truck door.

The next morning on his walk to the truck, Earnest felt a single bump against the calf of his leg. He turned and saw the dog. The lanky

animal reared on its hind legs and danced in a circle barking. Earnest look at the dog then walked back up the steps and into the house. He peeped into the kitchen to see what Floe was doing. Her back was facing him as she stood at the stove stirring a pan of simmering grits. Earnest went to their bedroom and returned with a single shot .22 caliber rifle. The stock was wrapped with black tape where it joined the action of the rifle, a reminder that Earnest batted a rabbit in the head after firing his last cartridge.

"That you Earnest?" Floe asked when she heard him kick the screen door open to leave. He ran to the truck and hollered back, "just forgot something." He poked the gun through the window, dropping it on the seat, and spun around to look back at the house in case she came to the door. The dog watched wagging her tail.

That afternoon Earnest didn't stop at the porch. He drove the truck behind the house and down to the barn which sat almost 100 yards away. He walked back and went to the kitchen where Floe was cooking. "What's for supper?" he asked as he positioned himself between her and a pan of left over biscuits.

"Cornbread, greens and pork chops. Why you hungry?" She asked.

"Yea, I guess," he said as he cupped a biscuit in the palm of his hand and poked it into his pants pocket.

"Why'd you drive all the way down to the barn?"

"Ah, I got some lumber from the job I'd like to keep," Earnest said as he walked away. Lori was watching TV. He walked outside, looking for the dog. On his knees, he saw the animal lying in a hole under the house. Earnest made a clucking sound with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. The stray came running out. Earnest flashed the biscuit and turned toward the barn. The dog walked along behind bumping Earnest's leg with its muzzle. Earnest looked back at the house, pulled the rifle through the window of the truck and held it down the side of his body as he walked behind the barn.

The dog danced on its hind legs barking as Earnest shoved a .22 bullet into the gun chamber. He avoided making eye contact with the dog. Earnest cocked the rifle and pulled the biscuit from his pocket, breaking it in three parts. He tossed the biscuit fragments in a single pile a short distance from his feet. When the dog ran toward the

biscuit, Earnest raised the rifle and lined the sights up with its head. The dog's head was to the ground and looking away from Earnest when he squeezed the trigger.

The gun made a quiet pop, but the dog screamed loud enough to be heard in the next county. Earnest had expected a clean kill with no sound other than the rifle. He struggled to re-load for a second shot to silence the dog but dropped the box of cartridges. The dog fell over, and its eyes rolled back and jerked a couple of times. A puddle of blood formed under the dog's head. Earnest was drawing deep laboring breaths by now. "Lord ah mercy," Earnest said, rubbing his hand across his stubby grey hair. He propped the gun against the barn and ran to the corner to look back at the house. No one was coming. When he returned the dog had got up, run a short distance staggered and fell again. Blood ran from the dogs' head down its neck and dropped to the ground. Earnest considered running after him to pass a lick with the butt of the rifle, but the dog was up again and out of sight into the tall broom sage behind the barn.

"That's right you run on to the creek and die. That way I won't have to haul you off or bury you," Earnest said aloud. He then went into the barn for a shovel to cover the blood trail behind the barn. After tossing two boards from the back of his pickup into the barn, Earnest drove the truck to the house. Lori was standing on the corner of the porch looking toward the barn. "Hot dang. I wonder if she heard," Earnest said into the truck windshield.

When Earnest came up the steps onto the porch, Lori ran to take his hand and walked inside with him. Earnest didn't speak at dinner. He watched Floe for signs she was waiting to say something. After the meal, Earnest read a Bible story to Lori. Standing in the doorway watching Floe tuck Lori in bed, he thought at least if she does know she is not likely to tell. He turned and walked onto the porch. There was a full moon. Earnest went down the steps and with the pace of a man with time on his hands walked down the lane to the spot where he first saw the stray dog from the kitchen window that morning. Looking up at the moon, he unzipped his pants.

The next afternoon Lori was again sitting in one of the rockers on the porch clutching the doll. Earnest climbed out of his pickup and walked up to her. Without speaking he sat in the extra rocker and looked down the lane toward the highway. The two sat there draped in silence until Floe came and announced dinner. That night Earnest read

the funnies from the newspapers to Lori.

After Floe put Lori to bed she came back and dropped an envelope in Earnest's lap. "It's another letter from Carl to Lori. No return address and a different postmark from all the others," she said. Floe signed deep, "I don't think he knows Stephanie's dead."

"We can't find him. He thinks he's wanted here. There ain't nothing we can do, Floe." Earnest crossed his arms, leaving the envelope his lap, and continued to stare at the television.

Twice more that week Earnest sat silent in the afternoon on the porch with Lori. Saturday he took her with him to the low water bridge where he washed his truck. Lori waded in the shallow water, but paid little attention to Earnest scrubbing the pickup.

"I ain't seen that old dog in several days. Did you do something?" Floe faced Earnest with her hands on her hips and asked him when they returned.

"Naw, but I am if it comes back." Earnest said.

More than a week had passed when Earnest turned into his driveway with his eyes focused on the front porch as he drove up the lane. At the place where the pastures ended and the yard began a post oak stood not ten feet from the road. Earnest seldom noticed it. He focused on the porch for signs of Lori. Today he glanced to that side of the lane and saw what looked like a pile of old, yellowed clothes. When he stopped the truck at the porch, Floe was standing at the top of the steps rubbing her hands. "That old dog is back and it's hurt," she said and pointed toward the post oak tree.

Earnest walked to the tree followed by Floe. He squatted beside the dog, hating to touch the clump of nastiness. "You shot the thing, didn't you," Flow asked.

Earnest looked around to see if Lori was standing any where near. "Naw, if I'd shot it, it wouldn't be alive." Earnest probed the hair plastered flat with blood on the dog's head and neck. H*ow do you shoot something in the head and it live*? He thought. The bullet appeared to have cut through the back of the dog's head but not cracking the skull. The dog was too weak to object to Earnest pulling on the matted hair. He jerked his hand back. "Go get me the peroxide," he told Floe. Earnest poured the peroxide on the dog's wound and watched the sickening open sore boil. Tiny white worm like creatures crawled from the back

of the dog's head. "We'll just have to wait and see what happens," he told Floe. He didn't tell her about the maggots in the wound.

Back at the house Earnest went to the bathroom and slipped Floe's tweezers in his pants pocket. He went back to the post oak carrying the peroxide. Lori watched him walk to the tree from the porch. Earnest began the slow process of boiling the maggots up and pulling them from the dog with the tweezers. It surprised Earnest when Lori kneeled beside him and started stroking the dog's hip as he worked. "Don't tell your granny we used her tweezers," Earnest said still focused totally on the maggots. He poured a purple colored liquid from a bottle onto the dog's head. The dog jumped but did not get up.

The next morning Lori was awake early. Floe watched from the kitchen window as Earnest walked toward the post oak carrying a pan of food scraps. Lori followed at a distance.

The purple stain from the medicine was still in the dog's hair the evening she got up from under the tree and walked toward the house. Lori and Earnest were sitting in the rockers on the porch watching. As the dog grew nearer Lori ran down the steps to meet it. As if warned by an adult, she stopped and turned to walk back without meeting the dog. The dog began to walk faster when Lori turned her back. The animal staggered, stopped then resumed its pace to catch up with Lori and bumped her with its muzzle twice on the back of her thigh. Lori looked around at the dog and laughed aloud.

"Floe," Earnest's voice was loud and anxious. He scooted to the edge of the rocker and sat up straight. The sound drew the attention of Lori and the dog. He softened his voice to a whisper. "Come here quick, watch this."

It was Floe, not Earnest, that heard Lori speak days later. Floe was sweeping the floor inside near the screen door. She noticed Lori rise from the rocking chair carrying the small doll. As Lori walked down the steps she glanced back over her shoulder as if to view a follower. Her now constant companion was curled up beside the rocker asleep. "Dog," she said clearly. The child's head snapped from side to side as if to see where the voice came from, and she hurried into the yard, not looking back.

Floe looked up to the ceiling of the room, shut her eyes and said, "Thanks you Lord."

That same evening Earnest also had news. The sheriff had come to the construction site to tell him that Carl had contact his office and found out that the district attorney did not plan to pursue the child abuse charge. "He's coming after her," Earnest said and turned and looked away.

Neither said anything for several minutes. Then Floe spoke. "It's a mixed blessing. I don't want to lose her, but I know she needs to be with her daddy."

"I know Carl. We're not losing her," Earnest whispered.

Earnest and Lori were sitting on the porch in the rockers when a black Chevrolet pickup with fog lights across the top came up the lane toward the house. The two watched the dust tail follow the truck without speaking. "Daddy," Lori screamed when she saw it was her father that emerged from the truck. She ran down the steps followed by the dog.

"Looks like you're finally gonna get rid of that old stray dog," Floe, who had run out onto the porch, said. Earnest turned and looked away, down the porch. He focused on the woods in the distance as if trying to spot the movement of an animal.

Illustrator: B*rody Coley*

Consuelo

Katie Wainwright

Consuelo had staked out the territory in front of the Chinaman's Café. To keep the peace she paid him a percentage, although as she often reminded him, the sidewalk was public property. "And I pay you good rent whenever I use the storage room."

She owned two shifts that skimmed every curve of her body, one gray satin and the other pink. Today she wore the pink with spaghetti straps and a hint of lace on the bodice. Black mesh stockings with ragged tears and crooked seams completed her outfit. The red plastic bag slung over her shoulder was her closet, her bank, her drugstore.

She'd been working the streets long enough to lose the country freshness, the alluring reticence that came from not being sure. Her direct gaze offered a business proposition, no more, no less, a situation not very inviting to the uninitiated. But her regulars knew she delivered, got her money, and kept her mouth shut.

The wrought iron lamppost was her anchor. She pressed against it, one arm extended over her head, the other reaching for the approaching sailor. She keeled to one side like a sail filled with wind.

"What will you give me?" She asked with a practiced smile. "I can give you..."

"Claps," replied the sailor. "Syphilis." He felt for his watch, intending to remove it from his arm to his back pocket. It was gone. She was good. "Give it back."

"Give what?"

"My watch. Before I call the police."

"Don't do that, love. Of truth, you don't wish that."

"Give it back."

She thrust her pelvis forward and made a grinding motion. "I can give you lots more."

"First, my watch."

"How about a rum? Right here, at the Chinaman's. We can have a little rum."

"My watch."

"I'm hungry," she said. "Buy me *congri* from around the corner?"

"My watch. Now."

She favored him with a long, lazy look. "I can sew that hole in your pants for you. I can wash your pants, if you want."

"Just give me back my goddam watch." The sailor reached out and grabbed her by the hair. "Right now."

Her dramatic shriek brought the Chinaman out of his establishment. He duck-waddled down the sidewalk. "Move on, Consuelo. . N*o plobems*. N*o plobems*."

The sailor abruptly let go the woman's coarse, thick mop.

"Who says we have problem?" she asked.

The Chinaman shook a fat finger with its vulgar jade ring and long, curved fingernail. He spoke through his scraggly, tobacco-streaked beard. "I say *plobem*."

Consuelo walked away.

"Hey! She's got my watch!"

She turned and held up empty hands, palms out.

The sailor jumped the distance that separated them. He grabbed her again, this time by the shoulders. She kicked his shins with high-heeled, pointed shoes. Bit his arm as he thrust his hand into her bosom and ran his fingers over her right breast and her left breast and there was nothing there.

"You see?" She leaned over and straightened her fishnet stockings, now ripped from knee to ankle. "There is no watch. I*mbecil*!"

"Here!" he said. "Here!" and with an angry swoop he tore the red bag off her shoulder, yanked it open, and dumped its contents.

"C*abrón*!"

Spread on the sidewalk were her pitiful belongings–a soiled handkerchief, a leather pouch with a few coins, a crushed box of

chiclets, a set of underpants, a silk garment rolled up, a comb, lipstick, a condom in its foil wrapper.

A mustached man, face sunburnt chocolate, stepped out of a nearby *cantina*, a bottle of H*atuey* in his hand, the smell of garlic enveloping him like a tearful cloud. "Leave her! Look what you have done! Now, it is me who calls the police!"

Consuelo spun around. "Please, Jorge! By god!" Summoning official brutality never solved anything. Street people were always guilty. It was simpler that way. "Forget it! Forget it. It was an equivocation. Nothing more."

Jorge raised an arm muscular from cutting cane and shoved the sailor's chest. "You disappear! Or you are dead."

The sailor stumbled backwards, caught himself and charged forward, ready to punch the man's face, eager to hear the crack of the splitting jaw; see blood pool under the eyes; the sockets turn black. He caught himself in time. Brawling of any sort, for any reason, instantly cancelled shore leave, and it was much too early for that.

He worked his tongue inside his mouth, spewed a glob of spit, and stomped back to the Chinaman's Café.

"Silvio," he snapped at the hovering waiter, "bring me a rum."

The waiter set down a bottle of Bacardi. "B*uenas tardes, Capitán Quique*. Are all you mariners off the ship?"

"The crew will be ashore in the next hour and I am not the Captain, and I am not crazy, either." Quique bolted down a swig of rum, instant fire in his stomach. "That watch was on my arm when she stopped me."

"That one? That one was trained by the gypsies."

"What does that mean?"

"They are fine masters of stealing. She took your watch."

"I don't think so. I ran my hand under her clothes. I dumped her bag. I almost caused a riot out there."

"She has it."

The sailor stared at the waiter.

"Her drawers hold a fortune."

"You mean–?"

"Right between her legs."

"You're sure of that?"

"As sure as I stand here. If that watch were mine, for certain I would go after it."

Señor Quique swigged more rum. "You're right."

Consuelo had disappeared down the block. With long-legged strides, the sailor passed the shoe shop, meat shop, dress shop. The barefoot boys who hung out in front of the Chinaman's Café trotted after him.

Quique gathered a following. In addition to the beggar boys, several idle women looking for excitement walked along. Shopkeepers leaned out of their doorways, some yelling encouragement, others telling him to go back where he came from and leave the woman alone. The procession made its noisy way down the sidewalk.

Hearing the stir and buzz behind him, Consuelo's man looked over his shoulder. Pivoting on one heel, he yelled, "You did not understand? You did not hear me? Come one step closer and you are a man dead." Jorge cracked his beer bottle against the curb and grasped the neck.

It's one thing to threaten a man in private; quite another to threaten him in front of a rag-tag army not of his own choosing. For Quique to discontinue his quest at this point would be a cowardly and disgraceful act, not to mention his followers might turn hostile if he let them down.

The sailor had no weapon. That was another of the ship captain's stipulations. No weapons on land.

Consuelo wrestled Jorge's arm, fighting him for the jagged glass bottle.

What came next took place with such lightning speed nobody was sure exactly how it happened. At one count there were ten different versions making rounds. Every story carried its nugget of truth. The consensus was that the sailor had grabbed Consuelo by the waist, pulled up her flimsy dress, and yanked down the fishnet stockings. With two hands. One hand. With his teeth. Consuelo's private parts were exposed for all to see. There again, the descriptions varied

widely. No two witnesses were in accord. Some saw a red rose tattooed on the prostitute's left buttock. Right buttock. Not red. White. Not a rose, a dove, swore the butcher. A woman who got a close look insisted it was a dirt smudge, lack of washing. What everyone did agree on was what fell out from between her legs. Wallets, money, bracelets, chains and holy medals jumbled in a heap around her feet. There was a universal astonishment as to how the woman managed to store so large a cache in so tight a place.

A beggar boy yelled, "Here comes the *Guardia Civil*!" and as if the street had opened up and swallowed them whole, the onlookers vanished, Jorge the first to disappear.

From the pile on the ground, the sailor fished out his watch. "This is all I want."

"H*ijo de puta*!" Consuelo hissed and crouched next to Quique, raking her loot back into the red plastic bag. "Now see what you've done? There's no reason for this!"

"You took my watch!" Quique thundered. "You thief!"

"You have it back! Is it worth ruining my life?"

The guard dismounted. He loomed as big as his horse. As he came closer, clicking the handcuffs open, shut, open, shut, a tremor hard enough to shake the world engulfed Consuelo. She'd heard the sadistic clink hitting the iron bedstead often enough. Her service was a *mordida*, a bite, the price of business undisturbed.

She couldn't run; she couldn't hide. The law stood before her. "I pay you–"

"Shut your mouth."

If the guard threw her in a jail cell, the regiment would entertain themselves using her day and night, not paying, same as he did.

She stepped behind the sailor looking for deliverance, invoking the heavenly host from a dim childhood, a shadowed past, praying to the *Virgen de la Caridad*, Jesus Christ the Son and God the Father, while fervently wishing she had between her fingers the stolen rosary coiled in the bottom of the red bag.

Three big steps and the guard stood before Consuelo, handcuffs dangling from enormous, fat hands.

"I did nothing," she said, fear deep as bone marrow forcing her

eyes closed.

A smothering feeling filled her chest and made her light-headed and dizzy. Through the roar of blood thundering in her ears, she heard a scuffle, and the guard saying, "Gun runner."

Consuelo's eyes flew open and she stared with great awe at the steel bracelets encircling the sailor's wrists.

"What the hell you talking about?" Quique yelled, yanking his arms away. "I just came off the Preston, the sugar freighter! Let me go!"

The guard struck him on the side of the head. "We know that. You first stopped at Customs–you're supposed to check in there, eh?"

Relief swept through Quique.. "Yes, of course. This is a mistake–"

A greasy grin slid over the guard's face. "Is it, now? Even if we have Juan Juarez's confession that you brought him a rifle?"

"A hunting rifle! That doesn't make me a gun runner!"

The guard wiped oily sweat off his brow. "In our jurisdiction bringing in weapons is a punishable offense. We act by direct order of El Presidente." The guard twisted Quique's arms and forced him to his knees. "*Comprende, amigo*?"

"You're mistaken! You don't understand! It's a *hunting–you understand hunting*?–a bang! bang! rifle for jaguars, rabbits, *jutias*, deer—"

The kick from the army boot cracked Quique's vertebrae. An electric pain shot up his spine.

In anguish he cried out to the prostitute. "Listen! Get my Captain! Call the Company!"

She turned her back on him, walked away, thought better of it. "I'll do what you say." She held out her hand, reaching for revenge and consolation. "Give me the watch."

The watch, so important minutes before, now seemed to Quique little enough to pay for freedom.

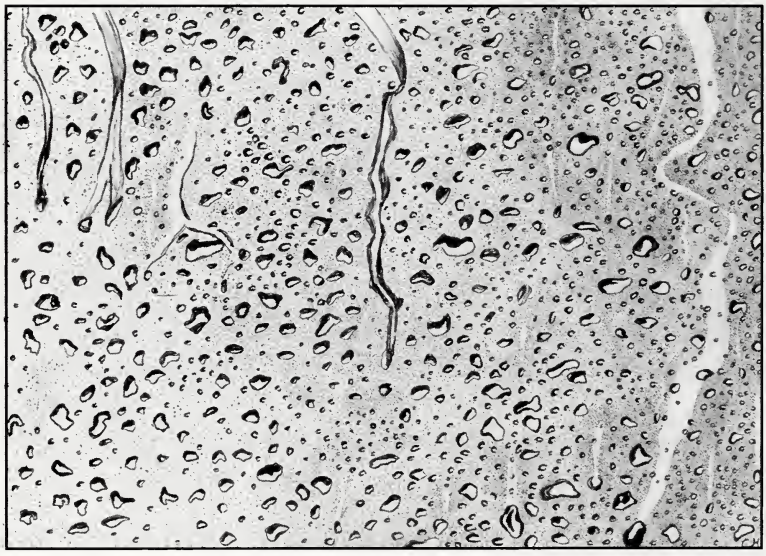
"Take this off my wrist!" he said to the guard. "Give it to her!"

The guard unsnapped the chrome band, deliberately examined the basket weave design, the crystal face, the numbers, the make, Timex. He dangled the watch before his prisoner and asked, "You want

me to give this watch to that prostitute? That whore?"

"Yes!" bellowed Quique. "Yes!"

"My friend, it is you who doesn't understand," the guard said softly, almost gently. "A gift of this magnitude is not for a street woman. This gift is best given to the proper authorities," and with a thin smile and an emphatic nod of his big head, the Rural Guard slipped the sailor's freedom into his shirt pocket.



Illustrator: Corey Hart

Poetry

Illustrator: Cody Bradford

Barry Dunlap *earned a Master's degree in English from Southeastern Louisiana University, where he studied under Tim Gautreaux. His work has been published in* Spillway Review, The Dead Mule, Southern Hum, Southern Scribe, Christianity and Literature, Pebble Lake Review, *and* Powhatan Review *(forthcoming). He currently lives in Hammond, Louisiana with his wife and four children.*

After Mardi Gras

Barry Dunlap

Pear trees lining
the street stand against
the February sky, reaching
arthritic fingers upward.

Desiring the heavens,
but clinging to three
trinkets of revelry—

green beads dangling
in the air like
the dreams of yesterday.

River Plop

Barry Dunlap

There's something spiritual
about a snake sliding
from a bank,
plopping into a gentle river.

Something about that wet,
coiling dance that shivers
my soul, makes me speak
in tongues unknown.

Karen Maceira. A *past Ruth Lilly National Collegiate Poetry Convocation participant, her poems have appeared in numerous publications such as* The Beloit Poetry Journal, The New Orleans Review, Negative Capability, The Christian Science Monitor, *and* English Journal. *She has also had reviews in* The Harvard Review, *as well as a cover essay on Galway Kinnell in the* Hollins Critic. A *native of New Orleans, she completed an* M.F.A. *at Penn State, where she studied with Bruce Weigl and Robin Becker. She now teaches high school English in Pearl River, Louisiana.*

At the Library

Karen Maceira

The man in line ahead of her
didn't know the curve of his cheek
caught her the same way
her husband's had as she knelt
before his coffin, memorizing.

She discovered
from photographs of decomposing
bodies in a book
that muscle forgets first.
Skin clings until it loses
consciousness.
Then teeth and bones,
closest to stone.

She reached up to touch his cheek.
He turned, eyes open, looking
past her with no expression.
She remembered where she was
and dropped her hand.

To My Son on the Subject of His Father's Shoes

Karen Maceira

I'll remember you this way:
the 14-year-old boy

who shined his father's shoes
so we could bring the clothes

to the funeral parlor,
not knowing the shoes

wouldn't be wanted,
his legs under

the white drape in the coffin.
You stood there

holding your father's
shined shoes,

one small gesture
he had already

stopped needing.

Karen Williams *main field of study is Southern—especially Louisiana and New Orleans—literature. She regularly teach courses in these fields at LSU. Her Ph. D. in American Cultural History and Contemporary Literary Theory is from Emory University. She also studied creative writing with Tim Gautreaux and completed a master's thesis of short stories under his direction in* 1984.

Red Riding

Karen Williams

For once the sky was lilac
But the earth itself spun red
Not a reflection of the early morning sun.
Opposite to its gentle blue,
Topsy-turvy.

She didn't want him,
And who could blame her?
Begotten not of lust but rage,
Not love nor hate but curiosity
Ravenous in its indifference.

Ether erases all
Sponges away
The unwilling cluster of perfectly shaped cells,
Cuts the throbbing cord
The womb cannot shelter
Because the wolf has already entered
And devoured it.

Sleeping Beauty

Karen Williams

It's time to wake up.
Not even magic lets beauty sleep
        One hundred years.
Inaction breeds catastrophes
        Not roses.
The thorns turn into daggers without pruning.
And the prince, should he arrive,
Wants a girl more lively—
At least animate.
He shouldn't have to breathe life
        Into the shroud.
There's no mystery there
Just a sleeping ninny,
Her boredom unpricked by conscience
        Or desire,
Who needs to find a band-aid
        And roll up her sleeves,
                Letting the sun shine
                        On her lily-white skin.

Peter Peter

Karen Williams

Was it worth it to keep me
    Away from the blues and greens
    Of meadow and sky
    Even the golden spell of hot sunlight,
        From the joys of Spring and Easter Eggs,
        Summer and Independence,
        The expectancy of Christmas and the Coming Year?

Now every night is Halloween
    A monochrome nightmare
    You tricked me into entering.
I saw the intricate designs and carvings
    You fashioned especially for me.
But failed to realize
    You were willing to scrape out
    All of the heart
    With its sticky threads
    And seeds of silver.

My body grows orange.
    Thin, brittle, and hollow
    As a shell.

Beauty and the Beast

Karen Williams

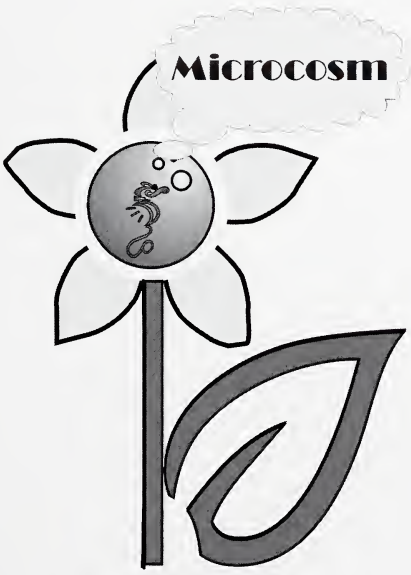
Yesterday I went where I wasn't supposed to.
To the forbidden west wing.
The deer looked at me so sadly
Gentle eyes in a sea of soft brown
His body graceful yet strong
Muscular and pliant
Beauty even in the precise lines of his hoof points.

But I knew it was already dead
Even before I saw the bones crunch
And their velvety red
Ooze richly—
Not spurting at all.
I suppose he caught the blood
Perhaps sucking it wholly into himself
Marrow into maw
Life to death to life.

Last night at dinner he had tried.
His silverware turned to toothpicks
In his thick paws,
Stiff and ineffectual.
He grunted and growled at the grilled salmon
Then remembered to comment on the weather.

And compliment my dress.
But I could tell he was still hungry
And knew that I could only whet that appetite—
Not satisfy it
Nothing but blood could do that—
Conquering, mastering,
Dragging home the prize.

I could only be a spectator—
Unless I risked all.
Life and limb was only the beginning.



Illustrator: Cari Williams